
News Release

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S BAD GRADES GET WORSE

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New SCAG Report Card Gives Region Low Marks for Transportation, Air Quality, Housing, Income, Other Areas

LOS ANGELES, CA – Worsening traffic congestion and air quality, the lack of affordable housing and the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs present major challenges to maintaining Southern California's quality of life, according to a new State of the Region report released today by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). The State of the Region serves as an annual "Report Card" for the six-county SCAG region, rating its performance in seven policy categories, including transportation, employment, income, housing, air quality, safety and education. In light of the report's findings, SCAG's leaders also noted that the funding cuts currently being considered in Sacramento could make matters significantly worse for the region.

"Southern California is one of the most dynamic regions in the world, but the challenges we face are severe," said Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge, who chairs the SCAG committee that developed the report. "We sincerely believe that this report should serve as a wake-up call for the region."

Southern California again ranked as the nation's most congested metropolitan area, with its grade declining from D in last year's report to a **D-**. The average Southern Californian experienced around 50 hours of delay due to traffic congestion, the highest among the nation's largest metropolitan areas. The annual delay per person was especially pronounced for Inland Empire residents, representing a 70 percent increase since 1990.

"We all know how bad traffic congestion is today, and it will only get worse unless we make significant investments in our transportation infrastructure," said Grand Terrace Mayor Lee Ann Garcia, chair of SCAG's Transportation Committee. "Our roads and freeways become more bogged down every year, and our transit systems are not meeting their full potential."

An even more dramatic drop occurred in the air quality grade, which went from a B- in last year's report to a **C** this year. After several years of improvement, the number of days exceeding federal ozone standards increased dramatically from 36 to 49 days, and 2003 saw the first Stage 1 alert for ozone since 1998. The report illustrates the direct relationship between increasing traffic congestion and worsening air pollution.

SCAG leaders noted that the state's recent decisions to scale back transportation investments are exacerbating the situation.

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“The proposed reductions in transportation revenues being contemplated in Sacramento have the potential of making matters significantly worse for Southern California,” said Brea Mayor and SCAG President Bev Perry. “If these reductions occur, not only will our traffic congestion and air quality worsen by postponing or eliminating scores of vital improvements, they also could trigger an even bigger loss of \$8 billion in additional federal transportation dollars, which would really impact our long-term economic recovery and our overall quality of life.”

With a continued dearth of affordable, available housing, Southern California’s housing grade remained at a **D+** in this year’s report. While the number of housing permits saw the largest single-year increase since 1990, housing affordability continues to be a significant hurdle. Less than one-third of the region’s households could afford a median-priced home in Southern California, compared to more than half of the households nationally. Among the nation’s nine major metro areas, Southern California has the highest percentage of households spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

Southern California also scored mixed grades in the other four areas:

- **Employment (B-)** – Even with some positive signs of job growth in recent months, the region still faces some fundamental economic challenges, most particularly the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs during the last several years. Overall, the region lost 16,000-24,000 jobs in 2003.
- **Income (C-)** - The Southern California region has plummeted from the fourth highest in 1970 among the nation’s 17 largest metropolitan regions, to 7th place in 1990, to 16th in 2001. Nearly one in five children in the region live in poverty.
- **Education (D)** – This represents one of the report’s worst grades. Less than 40 percent of the region’s high-school graduates have completed the coursework necessary for eligibility to the UC and Cal State University systems. Large disparities in educational attainment persist for the Latino and African-American communities when compared to non-Hispanic White and Asian populations.
- **Safety (B)** – This grade represents one of the report’s few bright spots. Violent crime rates across the region declined by about three percent, although Los Angeles County continues to have among the highest rates in the nation.

“The challenges raised by the State of the Region are interrelated,” said Santa Monica Councilwoman and SCAG Benchmarks Task Force Member Pam O’Connor. “Lower income residents tend to have fewer educational opportunities that will allow them to obtain better paying jobs. Without higher wages, they cannot afford a home. To find a home they can afford, they have to move farther and farther away from their job, which means they’re spending more time on the roads and adding to our congestion and air quality problems. Thus, we must work together as a region to solve these problems from a variety of approaches.”

For more information about SCAG’s State of the Region Report, please call Jeff Lustgarten at 323/466-3445. To view the complete report, visit the SCAG web site at www.scag.ca.gov.